The Reality of Ethnomethodology
Hugh Mehan, Houston Wood
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CHAPTER FIVE

The Reality Constructor

In Chapter 2, I described the appearance of "impossible objects": a pen at once absent and present, the sun as a satellite of the earth and the earth as a satellite of the sun. To resolve the contradiction of such appearances, persons act as if an object cannot be two things at once. The work that achieves this "object constancy assumption" is so successful that it is neither noticed by persons doing it nor by social scientists who study everyday life.

Much ethnomethodological theorizing has explored the work entailed in achieving the object constancy belief and other fundamental propositions of daily life. The ethnomethodologist finds that persons are constructing social structures without being aware of this work. This reality work is explicated by the construction of a "model of the actor."

In the normative model, rules, actors, and situations are assumed to be independent entities. In the ethnomethodological model, persons are treated as reality constructors. Rules are dependent upon the ceaseless, ongoing activities of persons within social situations. The ethnomethodological model is a characteristization of the way persons *create* situations and rules, and so at once create themselves and their social realities.[1]

A CONSTRUCTION OF THE REALITY CONSTRUCTOR

I will now attribute some minimal requisites for social interaction to

a model of the actor. The attributions are *constitutive*. They both create interaction and the possibility of interaction. These features have been culled from the writings of Schutz (1962, 1964, 1966, 1967, 1970a), from Garfinkel's (1963, 1967a) distillation of these writings, and from Cicourel's (1973a) further elaboration of this work.[2] My purpose is not to provide an accurate historical sequence in the development of the model. It is rather to provide a single, unified formulation so that the use of this device can be better understood.

This model of the reality constructor is composed of (1) social knowledge and (2) interpretive procedures that operate on that social knowledge.

Social Knowledge ✓

The properties of social knowledge can be summarized as follows:

1. Social knowledge provides *a practical interest* in the world. Garfinkel describes this feature as follows:

> Events, their relationships, their causal texture are not for [the person] matters of theoretic interest. He does not sanction the notiou that in dealing with them it is correct to address them with the interpretive rule that he knows nothing, or that he can assume that he knows nothing "just to see where it leads." In everyday situations what he knows is an integral feature of his social competence (1967a:273).

That is, as people conduct the affairs of their daily life, they are *not* constrained by the canons of the "scientific rationalities" (Garfinkel, 1967a:262–283). They are *not* concerned with semantic or conceptual clarity for its own sake, or insuring that their actions conform to the demands of formal logic.

2. Social knowledge is *socially distributed*. Garfinkel describes this feature as follows:

> There corresponds, thereby, to the common intersubjective world of communication, unpublicized knowledge which in the eyes of the actor is distributed among persons as grounds of their actions, i.e., of their motives or, in the radical sense of the term, their "interests," as constituent features of the social relationships of interaction. He assumes that there are matters that one person knows that he assumes others do not know. The ignorance of one party consists in what another knows that is motivationally relevant to the first. Thereby matters that are known in common are informed in

> their sense by the personal reservations, the matters that are selectively withheld. Thus the events of everyday situations are informed by this integral background of "meanings held in reserve," of matters known about self and others that are none of somebody else's business; in a word, the private life (Ibid.:276).

This feature of social knowledge provides that some people know some things, but not everybody knows all things. Interactants recognize this. Nonetheless, biographically specific meanings are treated as irrelevant for the purposes of communicating the here-and-now event to others.

3. Social knowledge is *tacit.* Garfinkel points out that any "event means for both the witness and the other more than the witness can say" (Ibid.:56). This feature of social knowledge provides that what both persons know in common cannot be said in so many words. This common, tacit knowing is used by people to build interaction.

4. Social knowledge *takes the world for granted.* Garfinkel writes:

> a relationship of undoubted correspondence is the sanctioned relationship between the-presented-appearance-of-the-object and the-intended-object-that-presents-itself-in-the-perspective-of-the-particular-appearance (Ibid.:55).

And he writes elsewhere:

> Schutz finds that in everyday situations the "practical theorist" achieves an ordering of events while seeking to retain and sanction the presupposition that the objects of the world are as they appear. The person coping with everyday affairs seeks an interpretation of these affairs while holding a line of "official neutrality" towards the interpretive rule that one may doubt the objects of the world as they appear. The actor's assumption consists in the expectation that a relationship of undoubted correspondence exists between the particular appearances of an object and the intended-object-that-appears-in-this-particular-fashion (Ibid.:272).

That is, people expect the world beyond to be accurately pictured by their way of looking at it. This feature of social knowledge makes it possible for objects to be accepted for what they appear to be on the surface.

This discussion establishes that the reality constructor has social knowledge, but this conception is static. People do not use all their knowledge in every situation. They do not apply all that they (tacitly) know at once. Therefore, our model must have a mechanism that activates the situationally relevant aspects of this constantly changing stock of knowledge.

Borrowing from Schutz, this feature has been talked about in various ways: as "constitutive rules" (Garfinkel, 1963), as "interpretive rules" (Garfinkel, 1967a), as "interpretive procedures" or "basic rules" (Cicourel, 1973a).[3] I will use the term "procedure," because it best conveys the sense that these are descriptions of interactional activities that are *done* by people in interaction.

Interpretive Procedures

Three interpretive procedures have been described by the ethnomethodologist:

1. *Searching for a normal form.* Cicourel (1973a:86) describes this interpretive procedure as follows:

> when discrepancies or ambiguities appear, speakers will attempt to normalize the presumed discrepancies . . . . this commonsense principle provides each member with instructions for unwittingly (and sometimes deliberately) evaluating and striving for a reciprocally assumed normal form judgment of his utterances and perceptions.[4]

2. *Doing a reciprocity of perspectives.* Cicourel (Ibid.:85–86) describes the reciprocity of perspectives as doing the work of sustaining the assumption that:

> (i) each would have the same experiences if they were to change places, and (ii) that until further notice they can disregard any differences that might arise from their respective personal ways of assigning meaning to objects and events.[5]

3. *Employing the et cetera principle.* Cicourel (Ibid.:87) describes this interpretive procedure as follows:

> The participants to a conversation must "fill in" meanings throughout the exchange and after the exchange when attempting to recall or reconstruct what happened because of the inadequacies of oral and non-oral communication, and the routine practice of leaving many intentions unstated (Garfinkel, 1964). Vague or ambiguous or truncated expressions are located by

> members, given meaning contextually and across contexts, by their retrospective-prospective sense of occurrence. Present utterances or descriptive accounts that contain ambiguous or promissory overtones can be examined prospectively by the speaker-bearer for their possible meaning in some future sense under the assumption of filling in meanings now and imagining the kinds of intentions that can be expected later. Or, past remarks can now be seen as clarifying present utterances.[6]

Hence, the et cetera principle has three interrelated parts. In some versions of the model, these features are treated as separate entities.

a. Unclear information is allowed to pass while clarifying information is sought.

b. Contextual information is sought over time to fill in the ambiguity of indexical expressions.

c. The filling in is accomplished by retrospective-prospective means. When vague, ambiguous, or unclear utterances occur, the vagueness is not immediately challenged or questioned. The hearer allows the unclear utterance to pass. He assumes that subsequent events will clarify the present ambiguity. If and when subsequent information becomes available, that present information is used to clarify the previously unclear events.[7]

DISPLAYING THE REALITY CONSTRUCTOR

The model of the reality constructor can be used as an analytic tool. I will illustrate this by providing a hypothetical account of an everyday event. A man driving to work sees a fuzzy object. After several minutes during which the object's appearance baffles him, he determines that it is a freeway sign. To account for this occurrence, I will attribute to the model of a freeway driver some of the elements necessary for driving the freeway in an acceptable manner.

Before this man can begin driving his car, in fact, even before he can leave his bed in the morning, put on his clothes, or drink his coffee, he must assume that objects are what they appear to be on the surface. If the motorist had scientifically rational doubts about the nature of objects appearing before him, he would not be able to act at all. If the motorist doubts that the floor under his bed is a floor, he will be unable to stand on that floor. If our motorist does not see the long ribbon of black ooze as a "freeway," the brightly colored mass hurtling toward him as a "car" with a competent driver who will drive past, not

at him, he may be unable to negotiate the roadway.[8] These suggest the taken-for-granted features of social knowledge I summarized above.

As the motorist drives the freeway, he is confronted by swirls of colors and sounds. Our motorist must transform these stimuli into meaningful wholes. This is the interpretive procedure "searching for a normal form." As an individual goes through a social situation (as the motorist drives his car), the individual searches for and selects features of the world which can be placed in a familiar schemata. Casting for coherent forms is an interpretive procedure performed on all knowledge systems.

When first confronted by swirling colors, the motorist sensed the presence of a "something," but its specific form, content, and dimensions were unknown. The assumed presence of "*some* object there" enabled the motorist to continue to look for features that would help him identify "the something" as a *specific* thing. In the language of the interpretive procedures discussed above, the motorist allowed unclear events to pass while seeking clarification. He waited to see what the object would mean then.

Although an object may not have a *specific* meaning at the time that it is initially apprehended, it has some meaning. For example, it is "an unclear object." Its specific meaning may become clear with subsequent events. After these events occur, the motorist is able to see in retrospect what the object was "all along." This retrospective filling in is an aspect of the interpretive procedure: employing the et cetera principle.

Of course, this now specific, clear meaning is also subject to subsequent reinterpretation. The object may not be a freeway sign, but a scaffold, or a truck; any subsequent determination will modify previous ones. "What it is now" will be "what it was all along."

The meaning of an object, event, or utterance is also "prospective." When a person does not immediately know the normal form meaning of an object, he assumes that its meaning will become clear later. The practice of "waiting until later to see what was intended now" is the "prospective" interpretive procedure.

The motorist knows this swirling object was a sign all along. He also knows that this object will be the same object the next time he confronts it. It will be the same object on all subsequent occasions. It will be the same object to any and all others who look at it. He maintains this knowledge by employing the "reciprocity of perspectives" interpretive procedure.

Now suppose our motorist needs to go from one part of the city to another. He might ask a gas station attendant for directions:

How do I get to Jack-in-the-Box from here?

The gas station attendant might give the following directions: See this street here? That takes you to the freeway. Stay on the freeway until you see the sign for Mazeville Road. Get off there. Jack-in-the-Box will be on your right, a few blocks down.

In order for the gas station attendant to tell our motorist this, the attendant must treat the freeway sign as a constant object. That is, the gas station attendant must also employ the reciprocity of perspectives interpretive procedure, which provides that the meaning of the objects, utterances, or events that he has encountered are the same that others have encountered. And, in order for the motorist to follow those directions, he must treat the signs, streets, and buildings he encounters and calls by certain names, as the same objects the gas station attendant or anybody else names in the same way.

Now, the motorist who follows these instructions may have had peculiar experiences with that particular street exit. For example, he may once have had a flat tire or an accident there. The gas station attendant may be having "a bad day," or he may have just won money at the racetrack. But the motorist is not interested in these biographical features. He is interested in getting to Jack-in-the-Box. If the gas station attendant were to begin to provide the motorist with the details about his declining business, the rising prices of his products, or what he will do with his winnings, the motorist would see that as strange. Likewise, the gas station attendant is not interested in *why* the motorist wants to go to Jack-in-the-Box. It is irrelevant for his purpose of giving instructions whether the motorist is going to Jack-in-the-Box to make a purchase, to meet someone, or to rob it. Both the motorist and the gas station attendant must treat any such biographically specific meanings as irrelevant for the purposes at hand. They must employ the socially distributed aspect of social knowledge.

The motorist who asks the gas station attendant for directions has a "practical interest in the world" (see the first property of social knowledge, above). He wants to go from one place to another. That practical problem occupies his time. He is not interested in theoretical matters about the journey, the freeway, or the sign, such as the laws of physics that explain how the sign is able to stand in high winds, or the principle that explains how the asphalt is able to support the weight of cars on it, or the kinetic theory that explains why the sign "lights up" when headlights shine on the sign at night. Theoretical reflection and practical problem-solving are separate activities. It is difficult to engage in both simultaneously. On another occasion, at another time, say, when the motorist and a friend are sipping coffee after dinner, they might engage

in a discussion of the physical principles of light reflection. But at the moment when the motorist is trying to navigate unfamiliar streets and heavy traffic, he is hardly interested in such theoretical matters.

The motorist is able to concentrate on his practical concerns of finding streets and signs and does not need to worry about asphalt strength and principles of light reflection because he "knows" that other people have these theoretical matters as *their* practical concerns. This is another facet of the social distribution of social knowledge. No member of society need know all society's knowledge in order to interact. But in order to function in everyday life, each must rely on the fact that some people have some knowledge of the world, and that others have other knowledge.

Likewise, no person need have a *formal* acquaintance with any of that knowledge. Just as a speaker of a language need not know the rules of grammar to speak that language (Chomsky, 1965), a person need not be able to list the rules of society to act in it. This illumines the meaning of the "tacit" feature of social knowledge.

Now let us examine the conversation between the motorist and the gas station attendant, especially the instruction the gas station attendant gave to the motorist so that he could go from one part of town to another.

Motorist. How do I get to Jack-in-the-Box from here?

Gas station attendant. See this street here? That takes you to the freeway. Stay on the freeway until you see the sign for Mazeville Road. Get off there. Jack-in-the-Box will be on your right, a few blocks down.

To ask the gas station attendant for directions, the motorist would need to know at least the following about socially distributed social knowledge: that there are people who can legitimately be asked for directions; that there are places where directions can be legitimately asked; and that there are times when such questions can legitimately be asked. If a priest hearing confession were asked for directions to Jack-in-the-Box, the person asking the question might be considered bizarre, a stranger, or incompetent. Knowing that there are people who can and cannot be asked for instructions, and knowing that there are those who *can* legitimately be asked for directions, and knowing that such a person has certain obligations to respond is presumably knowledge that "everyone (who is a competent member of society) knows."

The ethnomethodologist is not interested in compiling a list of the "background" knowledge required for successful interaction. The list I have begun above for the motorist merely scratches the surface of what he would have to know to ask that question. As I explain in a later section of this chapter, it seems unlikely that a complete list could ever be constructed.

To ask for directions, the motorist must consult his normal forms, which guide his selection of a person who would be likely to help him. The initial selection is prospective, for the person selected for instructions may be a stranger, a pathological liar, or a robber. Subsequent events will retrospectively inform the motorist if his initial prospective selection was accurate.

What does the gas station attendant's instruction tell the motorist? It seems to tell him everything that he needs to know. It tells him to turn at a certain street of a certain freeway. But notice that far more is implied by the utterance than is stated in words. The utterance assumes that the hearer can supply contextual information (see interpretive procedure 3b)—for example, that he knows the meaning of "freeway" and can recognize one when he sees one, and that he knows what a car is and can use one. It assumes that the person knows about making turns, and can make one, et cetera.

The instruction refers to a few landmarks, a freeway, and a particular sign. It does not provide a detailed map on which every building and street is identified with its dimensions, age, and number of dollars spent in its construction. The hearer must go beyond the information given in the instruction itself and fill in with particulars from his own past experience, and with normal forms that he gains along the way. Thus, the instructions, and the phenomena examined in Chapter 4, are incomplete. The operation of interpretive procedures on social knowledge show how such symbolic forms are managed by the actor.

EXPLORING THE MODEL THROUGH ETHNOGRAPHIES

No studies describing the use of social knowledge and interpretive procedures in actual settings have been conducted.[9] However, the model of the reality constructor need not be restricted to free inventions. It is a schemata that enables actual social scenes to be examined at a greater depth than is usual in sociological field studies. It suggests a way of

investigating particular scenes in order to *see general* features. Sociology presently searches particular scenes for *particular* features.

Consider, for example, the works of Becker, Whyte, and Goffman, acknowledged masters of the field study technique. Becker's (1953) analysis of marijuana users is typical. He describes how jazz musicians use "the smoke" to get "high" and improve their performance. Becker's (1968) later analysis of LSD use also describes how particular activities get done. He is not interested in using those particular activities as a vehicle for exploring the general features of all activities. Whyte (1955) provides descriptions of how gang members behave on street corners. Goffman's (1959, 1961, 1969) work reaches toward a deeper level, but it does not to seek features that appear in all situations.[10]

The model of the reality constructor, like Goffman's model, is "only" a schemata. However, it differs from Goffman, Becker and Whyte in directing the researcher's attention to transsituational features of particular situations. It provides a method for attempting ethnographies of the general problem of social order.

The choice between these alternative approaches must be made on extratheoretical grounds. The model of the reality constructor is *not* a higher ontological truth. (I return to this ontological issue at the end of this chapter.) For those interested in the particular features of particular scenes, traditional field work schemata are efficacious. For those interested in the general problem of social order, a model like the reality constructor is indicated.

EXPLORING THE MODEL THROUGH BREACHING

Field work studies are only one method of refining the reality constructor model. A second method is the use of "incongruity" or "breaching" procedures (see Chapters 2 and 12). The logic of the procedures derives from the claim that social structures are created by social structuring activities, work that is not apparent under normal circumstances. A corollary of this suggests that suppressing any of the models' features should "produce anomic effects and increase disorganization" (Garfinkel, 1963:215). I will adapt Garfinkel's breaching procedures to illustrate the necessity of the features of social knowledge, and interpretive procedures.

Breaching Social Knowledge

One of the features of everyday knowledge is that it provides a practical interest in the world (see p. 99 above). Garfinkel (1964, in 1967a:41–44) instructed a number of persons to converse while repressing this feature. He told them to adopt a *theoretic* interest in the conversation. This entailed seeking meanings "for their own sake," "just to see where it might lead." They were to show no regard for the practical circumstances surrounding the conversation.

The people who followed this procedure typically found that social order halted. This is the report of one person (*E*) who attempted to suppress the practical interest feature of social knowledge:

E My friend and I were talking about a man whose overbearing attitude annoyed us. My friend expressed his feeling:
S. I'm sick of him.
E. Would you explain what is wrong with you that you are sick?
S. Are you kidding me? You know what I mean.
E. Please explain your ailment.
S. (He listened to me with a puzzled look.) What came over you? We never talk this way, do we? (Ibid.:44).

The experimenter is not allowing what he knows to be "an integral feature" (Ibid.:273) of the scene. As a result, the ongoing interaction is swiftly disrupted. The subject demands to know "what came over" the experimenter, and points out that "We never talk this way." The repression of this feature of social knowledge breaches the subject's sense of normality, indicating that this feature is vital for the construction of everyday scenes.

A second feature of social knowledge is that it is socially distributed (see p. 99 above). Persons recognize that some persons know some things that others do not. These *personal* disparities in knowledge are supposed to be irrelevant in everyday interaction. Where they are not, it is assumed that the party with relevant personal knowledge will inform the other.

Garfinkel (Ibid.:75) demonstrated the importance of this feature by using the following procedure:

> the experimenter engaged others in conversation while he had a wire recorder hidden under his coat. In the course of the conversation the experimenter opened his jacket to reveal the recorder saying, "See what I have?" An initial pause was almost invariably followed by the question, "What are you doing with it?" . . . The fact that the conversation was revealed to have been recorded motivated new possibilities which the parties then sought to bring under the jurisdiction of an agreement that they had never specifically mentioned and that indeed did not previously exist.

The subjects knew that the experimenter knew things they did not, just as they knew they had knowledge the experimenter did not. But the subjects assumed as well that these disparities in knowledge were irrelevant to the interaction at hand. The appearance of the tape recorder made this taken-for-granted feature visible. By breaching it, Garfinkel demonstrated its importance to everyday interactions where it exists but is unnoticed. (For allied procedures breaching this feature, see Garfinkel, 1963:201–206; 1967a:71–73.)

The third feature of social knowledge I described above (p. 100) is its tacitness. Social knowledge is assumed to be shared by parties to an interaction. Though this shared knowledge is never exhaustively articulated, persons assume that they know a single world in common.

Garfinkel (1967a:51) designed a procedure to reveal the importance of this feature of social knowledge:

> Students were instructed to engage someone in conversation and to imagine and act on the assumption that what the other person was saying was directed by hidden motives which were his real ones.

In other words, students were asked to suspend the assumption that a body of knowledge was being tacitly held in common. The other person was seen as having a hidden body of knowledge ("motives") which were coloring all that person was doing.

Reviewing 35 instances of the implementation of this breaching procedure, Garfinkel concludes:

> The attitude was difficult to sustain and carry through. Students reported acute awareness of being "in an artificial game," of being unable to "live the part," and of frequently being "at a loss as to what to do next." . . . One student spoke for several when she said she was unable to get any results because so much of her effort was directed to maintaining an attitude of distrust that she was unable to follow the conversation. She said she was unable to imagine how her fellow conversationalist might be deceiving her because they were talking about such inconsequential matters (Ibid.).

In sum, students found that they could not suppress the belief that they held a corpus of knowledge in common with the other. Even attempting to breach this feature disrupted the interaction. Common tacit knowledge is thus indicated to be essential to social scenes.

A fourth and final feature of social knowledge is that it takes the world for granted (see p. 100 above). A real world exists independent of the knowledge of the world. This world is in direct correspondence with the knowledge. Knowledge and world picture each other (cf. Wittgenstein, 1921).

Garfinkel (Ibid.: 46) breached this feature by asking subjects to enter their homes with the attitude of a boarder. The home was a familiar world. The attitude of a boarder required the use of unfamiliar knowledge. The procedure was designed to explore the clash of foreign knowledge and a familiar world.

Some of the students were instructed only to observe their homes as a boarder. They were not to act on this attitude:

> Many reported that the attitude was difficult to sustain because with it quarreling, bickering, and hostile motivations became discomfitingly visible. Frequently an account that recited newly visible troubles was accompanied by the student's assertion that his account of family problems was not a "true" picture; the family was *really* a very happy one. Students were convinced that the view from the boarder's attitude was not their real home environment (Ibid.).

The fourth feature of knowledge maintains that there is an undoubted correspondence between knowledge and world. Thus, students found that if they adopted a boarder's knowledge, they experienced a boarder's world. They were anxious to assure themselves that the world that appeared under the aegis of the different knowledge was not the "real" world. That new world offered troubles that were not visible through a family member's knowledge.

Garfinkel's procedure does not suggest that one or the other of these experiences of the home is true. It suggests instead that any knowledge will produce the experience of a world that corresponds with that knowledge. An omnipresent feature of all social knowledge is that it matches a real and external reality.

Breaching Interpretive Procedures

The first of three interpretive procedures I described was "searching for a normal form" (p. 101 above). This refers to the work people do to transform discrepancies and ambiguities into similar patterns. I have adapted another of Garfinkel's (1963:229–235; 1967a:59–67) procedures to illustrate the results of frustrating normal forming.

Garfinkel's subjects were 28 premedical students. They were separately introduced to a purported expert on medical school admissions, who said he was interested in decreasing student anxiety over medical school admissions interviews. He solicited the student's opinion on how this might be done.

After a casual hour's discussion, the interviewer asked the students if they would like to hear a recording of an actual admisssions interview. All of the students had such interviews in their future and leaped at the opportunity as a possible means of increasing their chances of admission.

The applicant the students heard was excessively boorish. He used poor grammar and was stupid. He was pushy and abrasive, contradicting the interviewer when not being evasive. He degraded other schools and professions. On top of it all, he demanded to be told at the end of the interview how he had done. At this point the recording ended.

The students were asked to write a detailed assessment of this tape-recorded applicant's performance. They described him much as I did above. This was, then, a first and initially successful attempt at normal forming. The interviewer-experimenter then breached this procedure. He presented the subject with the fake applicant's "official records," which showed superior grades and recommendations. Before the subjects could begin to attempt to normalize this information, they were inundated with more. They were handed the fake interviewer's assessment, which showed that the interviewer had rated the applicant highly. Subjects were given the opinions of a "panel of psychiatrists," who, along with other premedical students, were alleged to have also listened to the recording. These materials, which were individually arranged, contradicted almost adjective by adjective the assessment the subjects had originally offered.

The procedures of normal forming were thus rendered inoperative. Three of the 28 subjects resolved the situation by deciding it was all

"a joke" or "merely an experiment." But for the majority who were unable to normalize in these ways, the world became "specifically senseless" (Garfinkel, 1963:189). They were bewildered. They exhibited great anxiety and discomfort. Some wondered if they had "gone crazy." It was as if once the normal forming procedures were rendered unsuccessful, they found themselves with "an amnesia for social structure" (Ibid.).

Garfinkel (Ibid.: 223–226) designed another procedure that illustrates the importance of the interpretive procedure that I have labeled "doing a reciprocity of perspectives" (p. 101 above). This procedure indicates that persons normally act to maintain that they share the same worlds and knowledge. To make this procedure fail:

> students were asked to enter a store, to select a customer, and to treat the customer as a clerk while giving no recognition that the subject was any other person than the experimenter took him to be and without giving any indication that the experimenter's treatment was anything other than perfectly reasonable and legitimate (Ibid.:223).

In Chapter 2, I reproduced one of the cases that resulted from this procedure. The other results offered by Garfinkel display the anomia exhibited there. A physics professor, it will be remembered, becomes the unsuspecting subject of an experimenter, who "mistakes" him for a mâitre d' and persists in her error despite his attempts to create a reciprocity of perspectives. He tells her afterward "I haven't been so shaken since ——— denounced my theory of ——— in 19—" (Ibid.: 226). These studies indicate that if the reciprocity of perspectives is not accepted by other interactants, social scenes are severely disrupted.

I labeled the third interpretive procedure "employing the et cetera principle" (see p. 101 above). Although this procedure has three subfeatures, the breaching experiment I use as an example seems to explore the importance of only one of them. This feature suggests that normal interactants must permit unclear information to pass while waiting for later clarifying information. Garfinkel (Ibid.:221–223) instructed students to converse without letting any statements pass that they did not immediately feel they understood. Here is one of the cases that resulted from this procedure:

> *Case 4.* During a conversation (with the *E*'s fiancee) the *E* questioned the meaning of various words used by the subject. For the first minute and a half the subject responded to the questions as if they were legitimate inquiries. Then she responded with "Why are you asking me these questions?" . . . She became nervous and jittery, her face and hand movements . . . uncontrolled. She appeared bewildered and complained that I was making her nervous and demanded that I "Stop it!"

The fiancee at last covered her face with a magazine and refused to talk. Their orderly relations had been temporarily anomicized by the experimenter's refusal to employ one of the et cetera procedures. His refusal forced the other interactant into simulating schizophrenia.

The Empirical Status of the Breaching Studies

Breaching procedures such as these are not experiments. Instead, Garfinkel (1967a:65) has suggested that they be called *demonstrations*, to emphasize their "results do no more than illustrate what I am talking about" (italics omitted). The linkage between any specific incongruity demonstration and a feature of social knowledge or interpretive procedure is obscure. The logic of the demonstrations does not follow from the theory in any determinate way. One must not look to these breaching studies as a way of building a theory of the reality constructor that will be comparable to the theories of the truly experimental sciences.

The value of such demonstrations is great nonetheless. Deep disruptions of the social order are possible at any moment, in any scene. These demonstrations strongly suggest that ceaseless reality work is necessary for social order to persist.

A serious problem with the breaching procedures is that they became too potent (see Chapter 2). Refinements on several of the techniques I mentioned led to anomia that threatened to linger for days. *Interested persons are strongly advised not to undertake any new breaching studies.* It is immoral to inflict them on others. However, there are ways that one can breach one's own sense of social order. This is not immoral, though it may be foolish. I will mention some of these self-breaching experiments in Chapter 12.

THE REALITY CONSTRUCTOR

Objective and constraining social structures are constructed by social structuring activities. To determine the nature of this reality work, the

ethnomethodologist constructs a "model of the actor." The procedures he attributes to the model are descriptions of activities that display the objective and constraining social structures.

Thus the ethnomethodological theory of the reality constructor is about the *procedures* that accomplish reality. It is not about any specific reality. Social scientists often adopt a privileged position about their pursuits. They claim that their findings are about the reality they study. Making connections between social class and occupation, for example, social scientists propose that social class is actually the reason a person has a certain job.

My ethnomethodology makes no such claim. I do not assume a correspondence between my theory and particular realities. The reality constructor is not a picture of actual persons. Jennings (personal communication) once proposed that the ultimate model of the reality constructor would be a machine that could engage in interaction with humans without detection. If the technological problems of such an operation could be overcome, and the ethnomethodologist was actually able to "plug in" the social knowledge and interpretive procedures sufficient for the machine to "pass," there would be no claim that the way the machine engages in interaction is the way a person engages in interaction.[11]

Ethnomethodology is not a method of pursuing the truth about the world. Rather, it examines the many versions, including its own, of the way the world is assembled. Ethnomethodology is not concerned with the truth value of statements about the world except as phenomena. It tries to determine the practices that make any statement true.

To this point we have discussed two kinds of "rules": normative rules (including legal, linguistic, and social science rules; see Chapter 4), and interpretive rules or procedures. Interpretive rules can be used as a theoretical device for understanding normative rule use. Interpretive procedures "fill in" the essential incompleteness of normative rules. Though interpretive procedures can be used in this way, it would be inconsistent to conclude that they are immune from the feature of incompleteness found in normative rules. In fact, each interpretive procedure exhibits the same feature of incompleteness.

The specter of incompleteness neither jeopardizes the enterprise nor spells its end. It is a source of mystery and wonder.

Looked at this way, constructing a list of interpretive procedures, or constructing any finite model is like fashioning a ladder, a tool to carry us upward. At some point, the ladder can be tossed away, as we will no longer depend on it for our climb (Wittgenstein, 1921).

NOTES

1. Ethnomethodologists adopted this research program from Schutz (1962, 1964), who spoke of the construction of "homunculi" and "puppets" as the theorists' solution of theoretical problems. Trading off a more recent metaphor, Crowle (1971) has suggested that the model is analogous to an android, that is, an automated simulated human (cf. Sacks, 1963).

2. Garfinkel has on numerous occasions attempted to codify and systematize Schutz's various discussions of the attitude of everyday life. His first attempt at this synthesis appears in his dissertation (Garfinkel, 1952). In his "Documentary Method" paper (Garfinkel, 1967a:89–94), he speaks in terms of the "findings" of an experiment reported there. In his 1960 paper on the "Rationalities" (1967a:272–279), he offers another summary of the "presuppositions of everyday life." A far more complex listing appears in his "Trust" paper (1963), where 8 presuppositions are listed and described. This list is repeated again as 11 presuppositions in the 1964 "Routine Grounds" paper (1967a:55–56).

Cicourel's treatment of the "interpretive procedures" has a similar history. His first writing (1968, in 1973a:42–73) made a strong analogy to linguistics; six interpretive procedures were "deep" rules to normative "surface rules." A discussion of "role theory" (1970, in 1973a:11–41) distributes the interpretive procedures into three "basic rules." Still another formulation (1969, in 1973a:74–98) produces four interpretive procedures.

3. In this talk, these theorists continually refer to the assumptions that the actor makes in interaction. They do *not* mean that the actor is consciously making choices prior to doing things. Postulating "assumptions" is one way the ethnomethodologist has for talking about the necessary aspects of interaction. There is no necessary commitment to a cognitive formulation. When the ethnomethodologist has been in dialogue with sociologists who employ models of action with mechanistic metaphors (e.g., Chomsky, 1965; Norman, 1969), the fundamentals have been talked about in 'generative' terms (Cicourel, 1973a:42–73). When the ethnomethodologist has been in dialogue with social theorists who use "game" or dramaturgical metaphors (e.g., Goffman, 1959, 1961), analogy has been made to "constitutive *rules*" (Garfinkel, 1963) or "basic *rules*" (Cicourel, 1973a:11–41). Presumably if organic theories were being offered as explanations of action (e.g., Spencer or Freud), the ethnomethodologist would rely on analogy to "basic needs."

In short, the way in which the fundamentals of social interaction are formulated depends on the contrastive theory. The form of the ethnomethodological argument about the construction of action is dialectical. It is dialectical in that any particular formulation cannot be understood without the contrastive theory it opposes.

4. Cicourel's "searching for a normal form" should be compared to Garfinkel's "seeking a scenic source" (1967a:92) and "searching for a pattern" (Ibid.:91).

5. Cicourel's description of the reciprocity of perspectives should be compared to Garfinkel's (1963:212–213; 1967:89).

6. Garfinkel treats the et cetera principle as three procedures: letting unclear information pass (1967a:3, 20–24, 90–91); filling in the ambiguity of indexical expressions (Ibid.:90–91, 92); and the retrospective-prospective dimension (Ibid.:89–90).

7. Crowle (1971:83) has translated these interpretive procedures into simply stated "rules for speakers and hearers." Here are the rules for the speaker, indicating how he should operate upon his social knowledge:

Rule 1. Talk normally. (Use Rule 2.)

Rule 2. Assume that the hearer will understand you as meaning the same as he would mean in the same situation.